Leadership Dynamics as Determinants of Project Success

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Abstract

The research examines the impact of leadership on project success given the increasingly complex and collaborative frameworks of projects today. While it is imperative to have technical competence and a detailed plan, this study underlines the importance of leadership as one fundamental element of successful outcomes. This research looks at how specific leadership behaviours influence the different aspects of project success such as achievement of goals, delivery on time, budget compliance, stakeholder satisfaction, and most importantly team cohesion.

A meaningful investigation of the research issue was conducted using a quantitative survey of more than 200 project practitioners involved in a variety of international projects using collaborative environments. The survey captured perceptions of leadership behaviours and their associated dimensions of project performance. In addition to descriptive data, the study employed regression analysis in order to identify support for strong relationships between transformational leadership characteristics and high levels of team cohesion and overall project success.

The findings from this article also describe the value of adaptive, motivator, and communicator leadership, in the context of dynamic project environments. This research contributes to the wider understanding of leadership as a strategic resource in project management and offers organizations practical implications to improve project deliverables through excellent leadership.

Keywords: Importance of Leadership, Project Success, Team Cohesion, Transformational Leadership

Introduction

In today's increasingly dynamic and more complex business environment, organizations are even more reliant on project work to meet strategic objectives, enhance innovation, and sustain competitive advantage. Most of the past literature has focused on project management tools, techniques, and methodologies, which are not sufficient for project success. But in a context where organizations are chronically confronted with tighter deadlines, changing priorities, and increasingly cross-disciplinary teams, the human aspect, particularly leadership, becomes an essential dimension for coping with complexity and ultimately ensuring project success. We can bring evidence from a variety of sectors, from local initiatives to international programs, even the most well-resourced and collectively smart projects fail without leadership. Within corporate settings, strong, effective, and consistent leadership is often the distinguishing feature between projects that have an impact and those that do not. This research examines leadership not as a fair-weather influence but as a fundamental feature of success in contemporary project work contexts.

Despite significant developments in project management frameworks with processes where scheduling, budgeting, and risk are managed with increasing company instructions, many projects continue to fall short of their objectives. These frameworks have tended to focus on procedural and technical aspects of projects and have tended not to manage human aspects of projects well, including the most important one - leadership. Leadership is regarded as a supplementary skill, and it is not identified as a core strategic requirement to successfully manage teams, engage with stakeholders, and deal with the complexities of successfully leading organizations. Projects will get done, but fail in critical success factors such as working together in teams or stakeholder engagement and relationships. The gap between leadership practices and

project execution represents an important challenge for organizations to succeed within what is becoming an increasingly complex, fast-paced, and competitive business environment. Closing the gap is vital to utilizing the full potential of project-based work and improving the overall performance of the project.

Materials and Methods

Project success depends not only on tools like Gantt charts but also on leadership—the human engine driving teamwork and accountability (PMI, 2021). Projects are temporary endeavors with unique goals, where success is measured by meeting stakeholder expectations (Bryde, 2005), delivering business value (Zwiebel & Smyrk, 2012), and increasingly, by sustainability and social impact (Gareis et al., 2013). The rise of Agile methods such as Scrum and Kanban (Highsmith, 2009) and the spread of global, virtual teams (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000) highlight the need for adaptable leadership. Leaders are now expected to be strategic motivators rather than administrators (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Crawford & Cooke-Davies, 2005). Effective leadership blends centralized, decentralized, or hybrid coordination (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2020) and prioritizes supportive practices such as empathy, conflict resolution, empowerment, and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Edmondson, 1999). Success also depends on organizational culture and a leader's ability to shape it (Schein, 2010; Kotter, 2012).

Leadership remains difficult to define, with perspectives ranging from "influence" (Maxwell, 1993) to "mobilizing others for shared aspirations" (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Summerfield (2014) proposed a simpler view: leadership is "making things better," emphasizing action over position.

Leadership theories have evolved across several eras (King, 1990; Turner, 2009). The Trait School emphasized that leaders are born with qualities such as drive and confidence (Kirkpatrick & Locke; Marshall, 2003), while the Behavioral School focused on balancing structure and relationships, identifying styles such as autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire (Stogdill &

Coons, 1957; Lewin et al., 1939). The Contingency School introduced the idea that effectiveness depends on context, through models such as Fiedler's theory, Situational Leadership, and Path-Goal Theory (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Turner, 2009). Later, the Visionary School distinguished transactional leaders, who rely on rewards and control, from transformational leaders, who inspire and guide change (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Keegan & Den Hartog, 2004). More recent perspectives include the Emotional Intelligence School, which highlights self-awareness, empathy, and adaptability as key to leadership (Goleman, 1995; Goleman et al., 2002), and the Competence School, which frames leadership effectiveness in terms of measurable competencies across EQ, MQ, and IQ (Turner, 2009; Dulewicz & Higgs). Together, these perspectives illustrate a shift from viewing leadership as innate traits to integrative models that combine behaviors, context, and competencies.

Research confirms leadership's role in project performance. Yang, Huang, and Wu (2010) found both transformational and transactional styles positively influence outcomes, mediated by teamwork. Dainty et al. (2005) identified twelve behavioral competencies crucial for success, while Rehan, Thorpe, & Heravi (2024) highlighted relationship management, self-management, and interpersonal sensitivity.

In IT, Stevenson & Starkweather (2010) and Gruden & Stare (2018) found soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and assertiveness more valued than technical expertise, emphasizing leadership's behavioral dimension.

Future projects will require leaders skilled in cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003), virtual team management (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014), and ethical leadership. Research should explore servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008), soft skills development, and innovative training such as simulations and mentoring (Yukl, 2012). Greater focus is also needed on micro-level leadership behaviors and informal leadership roles in projects.

The following hypotheses were developed based on established leadership theories and prior empirical studies that demonstrate how leadership behaviors influence team performance and project outcomes.

Hypothesis 1: Leadership should be seen as action-oriented, not role-bound.

Hypothesis 2: The effectiveness of leadership styles is contingent on situational and follower factors.

Hypothesis 3: Leadership theory has evolved from traits toward behaviors, situational context, and competencies.

Hypothesis 4: No single leadership style is universally effective; success depends on context.

This study explores the influence of leadership on project success in international and collaborative projects. A quantitative approach was employed using a structured online survey with 5-point Likert scale questions to capture perceptions of leadership effectiveness and project outcomes. Purposive sampling targeted 211 experienced project professionals across various roles, industries, team sizes, and project durations to provide diverse insights (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016).

Data collected covered demographics, leadership behaviors, and project success factors. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and regression modeling to examine relationships between leadership practices and project outcomes. Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics and overall perceptions, ANOVA tested differences across demographic groups, and regression predicted outcomes like motivation, team effectiveness, and stakeholder satisfaction based on leadership behaviors.

The survey included 25 questions: demographics (Q1–6), leadership perceptions (Q7–15), project complexity and context (Q16–20), project performance (Q21–22), and

interpersonal/communication skills (Q23–25). Questions were linked to four hypotheses concerning leadership vision, style effectiveness, and evolving leadership theory (see Table 2).

The study ensured anonymity, informed consent, and voluntary participation. Ethical principles followed Kant's (2001) categorical imperative, treating participants as ends in themselves, enhancing the study's reliability and trustworthiness.

Results and Discussion

This part presents results from the survey examining leadership's role in project success across international and collaborative contexts. Transformational and participative leadership styles were found to significantly enhance project performance, team cohesion, and goal achievement. Leadership effectiveness varies by demographics, role, and experience, as supported by ANOVA and regression analyses.

Multiple regression showed that leadership behaviors and project characteristics explained 39.1% of variance in team motivation ($R = 0.626$, $F = 18.66$, $p < 0.001$). The strongest positive predictor was Encouraging Creative Thinking ($\beta = 0.232$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Stakeholder Diversity ($\beta = 0.207$, $p < 0.001$) and Technical Complexity ($\beta = 0.135$, $p = 0.002$). Variables like developing team strengths, prioritizing well-being, and building relationships were not significant. These findings suggest intellectual stimulation and diverse, challenging projects drive motivation, whereas relational or well-being-focused behaviors are less directly motivational.

Regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.380$, $F = 25.09$, $p < 0.001$) indicated that Project Progress ($\beta = 0.426$, $p < 0.001$) was the strongest predictor of stakeholder satisfaction, followed by Communication Skills ($\beta = 0.138$, $p = 0.030$), Technical Complexity ($\beta = 0.121$, $p = 0.020$), and Stakeholder Diversity ($\beta = 0.118$, $p = 0.040$). Task efficiency had a marginal effect. Leadership and project characteristics collectively influence stakeholder satisfaction, with progress and communication being key drivers.

Regression results ($R^2 = 0.260$, $F = 14.43$, $p < 0.001$) showed that Managing Interpersonal Relationships ($\beta = 0.220$, $p = 0.01$) and Fostering Collaboration ($\beta = 0.178$, $p = 0.03$) significantly improved team cohesion. Other behaviors, including prioritizing well-being, supporting individuals, or passive intervention, were not significant. These results emphasize the importance of proactive, relational, and collaborative leadership for cohesive and effective teams.

Based on the results we can say that leadership behaviors—particularly those encouraging creativity, fostering collaboration, and managing relationships—combined with project factors such as complexity and stakeholder diversity, are key drivers of motivation, stakeholder satisfaction, and team cohesion in international projects.

Overall, this research adds considerable evidence to the importance of leadership in terms of project management and project success in both international and collaborative work environments. Across all three models, team motivation, stakeholder satisfaction and team cohesion, leadership behaviors demonstrated statistical significance. Specifically, inspiring creative thinking, engaging with diverse stakeholders, and changing how people engage with technical complexity are three significant factors having a positive influence on team motivation. For stakeholder satisfaction, nothing had a larger impact than a project's timeline and effective communication. Team cohesion is significantly influenced by leadership behaviors in more general ways, aligning with other literature to understand leadership as a focus on relationships alongside task-oriented leadership. Overall, the variances explained in each population (39.1 percent for motivation, 38 percent for stakeholder satisfaction; and 26 percent for cohesion) demonstrate moderate to strong explanatory power in terms of leadership and project-specific variables, and the overall importance of leadership when leading and managing teams, especially in complex, multicultural projects. These findings add some reassurance as to the importance of leadership in project management and the requirement for improving the leadership skill set required for any given project to be successful.

Conclusion

This study examined the roles of leadership behaviors and their relationship to project success, particularly with respect to motivating and creating cohesive teams in international and collaborative projects. The research was based on data from 211 participants and adopted a transformational leadership framework.. The findings show that leadership behaviors like stimulating creative thought, handling the technical complexities of projects, and managing the relationships of various stakeholders have potential in improving team performance and engagement.

On the other hand, other supportive behaviors, such as modeling concern for the team, or developing the strengths of individuals, rarely contributed to key project outcomes, which indicates that, in settings that are fast-paced and high-stakes, team members pay more attention to leaders who provide intellectual stimulation or strategic direction, than who provide only emotional support.

This study raises questions around adaptive leadership, where inspiring innovation, building inclusive teams, and leading through complexity are heightened leadership demands. The findings from this study provide important considerations for leadership development and project design and should work toward developing a cadre of leaders that inspire, stimulate, and lead teams made up of diverse members toward success.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that leadership development programs in international and collaborative project settings emphasize skills that foster creativity, adaptability, and inclusivity. Leaders should be trained to stimulate innovative thinking within teams and to embrace technical challenges and stakeholder diversity as opportunities for motivation and cohesion. Organizations should prioritize assigning leaders who can manage complexity and facilitate dynamic team environments, rather than focusing solely on interpersonal or emotional support behaviors. Additionally, project design should incorporate elements that intellectually engage team members and encourage collaboration across diverse groups. Future leadership strategies should adopt a situational approach, enabling leaders to adjust

their style based on project demands and team composition for optimal outcomes. Finally, institutions managing youth, Erasmus+, or globally distributed teams should consider these leadership factors when planning training or assigning responsibilities to maximize team engagement and overall project success.

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